

FINDING THE NERVE



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The Airmen stood around, chatting nervously. They knew what to expect, but they were still apprehensive.

Then the chatter stopped. They put on their chemical gear and walked into the ominous chamber. The door shut and sealed tightly behind them. Now they had to find and identify the deadly chemicals within.

More than an hour later, all the Airmen filed out of the chamber.

The readiness Airmen were students at the Chemical Defense Training Facility at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. They trained in a “live” chemical environment as part of their job.

“These are real nerve agents,” readiness technician Tech. Sgt. James Smith said. “The consequences, if someone is exposed, are real as well. This is not just some basic training gas chamber.”

Although the Army maintains it, the chamber is a joint training facility. Air Force, Army, Navy and Marine instructors provide the training. International students and instructors also go through the course on a regular basis.

For the Air Force, this chamber exercise is the culmination of a two-week, craftsman-level course that includes classroom and field training for readiness technicians. These instructors provide nuclear, biological and chemical training to Airmen via hands-on and classroom instruction. The training is mandatory for all Airmen, especially for those deploying.

The chemical training takes place in a sealed chamber within the CDTF. Each student receives training on all the equipment. Students also receive a long list of regulations that pertain to safety and chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear training before he or she enters the chamber — safety is the number one priority.

“Safety here can mean the difference between life and death,” said Army Sgt. 1st Class George Young, CDTF operations non-commissioned officer. “We stress that to the cadre. Everyone is a safety officer inside the chamber. If we see an action that we deem unsafe, we stop that action.”

The air in the chamber recycles about every five minutes. Students cannot bring anything into the chamber that they want to keep, except mask inserts. The students receive everything they need when they arrive, even underwear. Whatever goes in the chamber must then be decontaminated when it comes out. That includes people.

There has never been a mishap here, said the instructors. And they are very proud of that fact, although, that does not settle the nerves of the students.

Masks are fit-tested, checked, checked again and then checked again. Instructors spray stannic chloride around the mask to ensure every student is confident in his or her mask seal. If a student can smell the stannic chloride, instructors tighten and inspect the mask.

Once inside the chamber, students begin their tests, using M8 and M9 chemical detector paper as well as sensors, looking for and testing anything that could potentially be a threat. The nerve agents present are tabun, sarin, soman and VX, the most well known nerve agents.

Since 1999, about 2,780 Airmen have braved the chamber.

“The chamber gives Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines confidence in their gear,” Sergeant Young said. “They can go out and teach our forces because they are living proof that nuclear biological and chemical equipment works.”



DANGER
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